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## VISUALIZING LITERACY: BUILDING BRIDGES WITH MEDIA

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*In this qualitative teacher-researcher one-year classroom study, the author focused upon the literacy strategies that four low-achieving writers used while creating and interpreting music video compositions. The students read a variety of musical and video texts as they composed their own music video project. The guiding question of this research was, to what extent do lower-achieving students engage with complex composition strategies, particularly when composing a video project in the context of a media-based language arts elective? The data indicate that the focus students demonstrated a number of complex composition strategies through their reading and composing of a video text. Implications for a broadened notion of composition and literacy instruction are discussed.*

If, during the initial days of data collection in my classroom, someone would have told me that I would be writing about the complex compositional skills demonstrated by the particular group of students presented in this article, I would have been stunned. They were the group that, when I saw their names on the roster prior to first day of class, caused me to take a deep breath of preparation and resolve to believe the best about all students. They were the group that caused me most frustration because of their high absentee rate, slowness in working on the project, and lackadaisical treatment of the equipment.

However, experience should have told me that this was the very group I would and should be writing about. Numerous times, I have seen boys like these who fell through the cracks in my regular English classroom, yet achieved success on video-related assignments in my

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elective media courses. Over the past decade, I have taught a number of students with attitudes and abilities just like the ones presented here—students who were not motivated to read typical English class materials or interested in writing their thoughts about them.

Yet, despite their apparent lack of interest in classroom print literacy, these students were actually highly literate with genres not typically respected in language arts classrooms. They demonstrated being astute readers of media texts, having competency and creativity in using a video camera, and navigating a complicated non-linear video editing system to create a skillfully composed music video. How, then, did these students, who were highly resistant to the print skills necessary for success in their regular English classes, succeed when performing similar tasks with media materials?

The research presented in this study was guided by the question, To what extent do lower-achieving students engage with complex composition strategies, particularly when composing a video project in the context of a media-based language arts elective?

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

To begin, what should this process by which students compose with video be called? How should video be situated in the study of literacy? Terminology is often problematic when dealing in emergent disciplines, and the fields that deal with video—"media literacy," "multiliteracies" or "multi-modal literacy"—are no exception. Both Tyner (1998) and Kist (2005) have delineated the differences and nuances emerging from literacies nomenclature. In my work as a teacher and researcher, I have relied on Aufderheide's (1993) oft-cited definition of media literacy, which is the ability "...to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate messages in a variety of forms (p. xx). I have also found Tyner's (2000) description for the rationale of a multiliteracy approach useful as well: "multiliteracies attempt to build on a broad understanding of the practices of alphabetic literacy and to expand the concept of literacy to include a random combination of digital practices used with video, audio, interactivity, still images, and so on" (p. xvii).

Yet despite a number of calls for literacy more broadly defined (Gee, 2003; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Kinzer & Leander, 2003; New London Group, 1996; Smagorinsky, 2002), there is still a hierarchical perception of print being the pinnacle of literacy (Brandt, 2001; Kist, 2005; Tyner, 1998). In a classroom setting, school-based print

literacies typically overshadow other literacies. Fleckenstein (2002) stated that

When we enter our classrooms and begin to teach composition, reading, and literature, we rarely reference the rich variety of images infusing our worlds. Instead, we reference language, using language to do so. We turn our backs on imagery. (p. 3)

The perception of a literacy hierarchy lingers despite research that documented students working with media texts increased their print literacy skills (Hobbs & Frost, 2003) or that students have demonstrated remarkable facility with multiliteracies (Goodman, 2003; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Bruce, 2004). Kist (2005) offered an appropriate consideration when he asked, “should working in print text be the only reading and writing that is privileged to be called *literacy*?” (p. 12, emphasis in original).

Why is it important to study similarities and differences among various literacies, particularly when dealing with composition? If there are literacies that can accomplish the same basic concepts through various modalities, would not those students who struggle with expressing their thoughts with print likewise struggle expressing their thoughts through other means? What could multimodal composition—in this case, with video—teach us about the way in which print writers experience difficulty in expressing their ideas, particularly in the context of a classroom setting?

In written composition, it may be that students who struggle with print have a difficult time conveying their thoughts using traditional conventions. For example, Collins (1998) found that struggling writers had a difficult time expressing their thoughts in writing because they could not “see” what the essay was supposed to look like. He used graphic organizers to help students visualize what the structure of the essay should resemble. Collins was able to help those students scaffold their understanding of print conventions by using templates to show the shape of the paragraph. In providing clarification between visuals and language, Collins stated that “images are synchronic, giving the whole picture at once, while language is diachronic, giving us meaning over time. Images therefore can help us see, quite literally, where our understanding of both topic and words is going” (p. 161).

There are foundational differences in composing with words and composing with video. Print relies on a symbolic representation system whereas video relies primarily on visuals, audio, and often, text (Danesi, 1994; Goodman, 2003; Kress, 2003). Despite the visual

differences between the print and video, commonalities exist. Hobson (1998) stated that “the composing processes across different media are similar; the basic algorithms are not as disconnected as we in the verbal fields believe” (p. 140).

Smagorinsky’s (2002) definition of composition, in particular, can be used to examine video production because it focuses on the sociocultural activity involved in composing rather than only on print processes. Specifically, he explained that composing involves the following:

- the use of an appropriate tool or set of tools;
- an understanding of the conventions and genres within which one is working and an understanding of the effects of breaking these conventions;
- an extended process that usually includes planning, drafting, feedback, reflection, and revising;
- building on prior knowledge and understanding as a basis for the construction of new ideas and a new text;
- new learning that takes place through the process of composing; and
- rewarding both the process of composing and the ultimate texts as sources of meaning. (p. 10)

Students who compose with video might very well demonstrate evidence of the above-listed processes. As such, these processes, when considered together, provide one possible template for examining how students who traditionally struggle with print composition might exhibit those same compositional skills through a different medium.

## **METHODS**

The present study took place in an affluent midwestern suburban high school. This was a teacher-researcher study (Ernst, 1994; Gallas, 1994), which Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1993) defined as the “...systematic, intentional inquiry by teachers about their own school and classroom work” (p. 24). As the primary instructor for the course I had proposed, designed, and taught for a decade, this study took place within the confines of my well-established classroom. As the primary researcher, I sought to systematically document the processes by which my students composed their video projects. The benefits of this research paradigm allowed me insider knowledge of the day-to-day happenings of the classroom, projects, and, most importantly, the students.

The classroom in which this study occurred was in my Communications II course, a yearlong class that was the second in a sequential English media literacy elective. Over two years, the Communications I and II courses covered a series of media principles (Tyner, 1998) and video assignments (e.g., community news broadcasts, newsmagazine, video themes, music videos, short films, mini-documentaries, public service announcements, and advertisements).

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

The data collection for the case study project presented here took place during one semester of the yearlong course. The assignment required the students to select a song for which they would compose the visuals in the format of a music video. Project requirements included selection a song for which they would create a storyboard, a shot list of potential footage they would shoot, raw video footage, scripting of raw footage, and editing the video on a digital video editing program. In addition to creating their own video, the class viewed a number of professional music videos (whole or excerpts of) in order to critically read both production and cultural elements. The dual emphasis on composing and reading was embedded throughout the course. Reading videos often went in tandem with a mini-lesson on how the segment was produced, with particular emphasis on camera or editing techniques.

The following sections detail my data sources and provide a brief overview of how I utilized them in my data analysis:

#### *Surveys*

I designed a survey (reliability of the survey Chrombach's  $\alpha = .67$ ) to include both Likert scale and short answers dealing with their affinity toward and capabilities with print and media. I surveyed all 82 students in the four Communications I and II courses and entered all the Likert responses into a database so that responses could be categorized by gender and achievement level. In doing so, I was able to examine individual student and production groups' responses with the rest of the program through a comparison of means.

I entered all student short answers into a word processing document and sorted the student responses by each of the 10 short answer prompts. I used inductive analysis (Patton, 1990) for each of the short answer questions that could be read and coded for convergence (Guba, 1978). After categorizing convergent themes, I combined both Likert and short answers into a spreadsheet so that all data from the

survey could be sorted by gender, achievement, and/or response to the question.

### *Retrospective Think-Aloud Protocols*

Using retrospective protocol analysis (Hayes & Flower, 1980), I audiotaped production groups each time the students watched newly taped footage. I did this because students reacted to and evaluated the footage they had taken, and often provided anecdotal information regarding their experiences while videotaping. During repeated playbacks of each audiotape, I kept lists of what the students were doing, noted how the students talked about their work, and transcribed salient parts of each tape in which the dialogue provided illustrative examples of the students' composition processes. For each group's retrospective sessions, I wrote narrative summaries (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993) in order to look for emerging patterns.

### *Videotapes*

For this case study group, I videotaped six class periods (two brainstorming and four editing sessions) at times when they were making critical decisions about their video compositions. Each of the videotaped sessions lasted between 20 and 50 minutes.

As the primary teacher, I was privy to the daily happenings of each group's progress on their project. With that knowledge, I videotaped the students' work sessions only on those days when they were conceptualizing their projects or substantially editing their videos. I viewed each session multiple times, noting the tape counter times and identifying what occurred during the session, transcribing key dialogue, and coding the students' video literacy behaviors as related to the aspects of the composing processes defined by Smagorinsky (2002).

### *Interviews*

At the end of each of the music video project, I interviewed 17 students in the Communications II classes, including each member of the case study group. The eight questions ranged from similarities and differences they saw between video and writing, to their group dynamics, to what they learned during the production process. Each of those interviews was transcribed. As I did with each of the survey short answers, I blind-coded and sorted the students' answers according to each of the interview questions. I then used inductive analysis (Patton, 1990) to analyze each interview, looking for emergent patterns and themes related to Smagorinsky's (2002) definition of the composing process. By coding the interview questions, I was also able to compare their answers with their initial survey responses.

*Teacher Research Journal*

I kept a daily log of classroom activities for each of the production groups for one Communications II course. In addition to the daily summary of each group's classwork, I also recorded anecdotal information of student successes, frustrations, setbacks, and puzzling events. In terms of my data analysis, my teacher journal provided a documented narrative timeline of the students' progress that allowed me to contextualize an interview or protocol. One area in which the journal proved especially helpful with this group was detailing the numerous days in which students were either absent or had forgotten to bring their taped footage, particularly in comparison to the other groups.

*Profile of Group Members*

Like all the other production teams, this all male group, consisting of three seniors and one junior, self-selected members:

- Craig had a GPA of 2.5 and an IEP stating his need for additional time with writing assignments. During the summer preceding his senior year, he traveled to Guatemala with the Amigos volunteer program and was actively involved in the Spanish Club. He was a member of the school's cross-country team and enjoyed listening to classic rock music.
- Eddie, a senior who was a member of the school's football team, had a 2.4 GPA. He was popular with his classmates and was conscientious about his grades. His bellowing laugh earned *Best Laugh* in the school's yearbook.
- Tom transferred into the school district prior to his sophomore year and had a 2.8 GPA. He was a member of the track team, expressed an interest in bodybuilding, and was the first (out of eight) students in the Communications II classes to get his tongue pierced during that school year.
- Michael was the group's lone junior and had a GPA of 2.2. A member of the junior varsity basketball team, he was also an officer in "It's Your Move," a student group that promoted diversity awareness in the high school. He also had near-perfect attendance for the school year.

While the group did end up composing a music video that contained complex videography and editing and stayed true to their original project vision, they were the least self-initiating group of

the 13 separate production teams in both Communications II classes. My teacher research journal has a number of entry days recorded in which their production team did no work in class because they had not videotaped their needed footage or were missing members due to their group's higher than average absenteeism.

I emphasize the problems of the group dynamics, because, despite this being the worst group (in terms of grades, attendance, and interest level) when compared to the other production teams, the students still showed a high level of involvement and ownership with the project. Moreover, despite their self-proclaimed "slacker" approach, they demonstrated a number of complex writing strategies in creating their music video composition, as I will detail in the Findings section.

## ***FINDINGS***

I have organized the Findings section using the aforementioned definition of the composing process (Smagorinsky, 2002). Specifically, I present data exemplars that demonstrate how the participating students used (or reported using) each of the aspects of the composing process that Smagorinsky enumerates in his definition. The aspects of the composing process and the associated data exemplars are as follows.

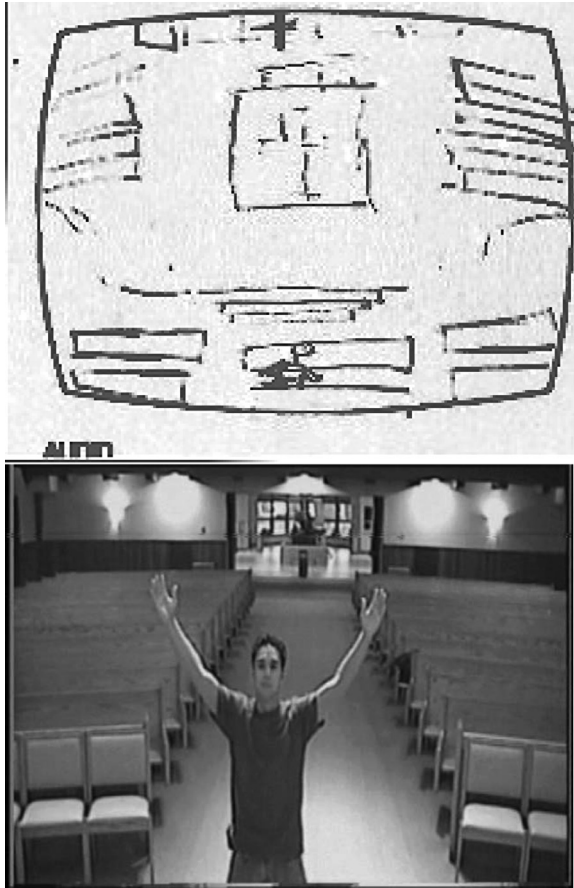
### ***The Use of an Appropriate Tool or Set of Tools***

Students in this study created a music video with the compositional tools of storyboard sheets, a video camera, and a non-linear digital editing program. They understood many of the conventions of the music video genre, and had facility with using camera and editing techniques.

The images in Figure 1 are an example of how they used the tools of video composition to visualize the expression of their ideas. It is important to note the similarity between their initial visualization of the video to the finished product. The storyboard represents a boy in a church raising his arms to express the loss he feels for a dead friend. The still frame from the video mirrors the storyboard's depiction of the smallness and the isolation of the boy amid the empty pews.

Beginning with the visualization of the text, the students re-presented their thoughts through a reading of a media text, brainstormed potential compositional images that the reading evoked, and composed those initial images to final product. In working with students





**Figure 1. Storyboard of initial concept and still-frame of final video.**

and video for 15 years, I have noticed that the verisimilitude from thought to final product is something that happens consistently in video compositions.

Another way to examine their capacity to use video as a compositional tool is to compare it with their comfort level with print. For example, in separate interviews with each of the students, they all detailed their ability to express their ideas with video much easier than they could with print (see Tables 1 and 2).

The boys all stated their frustration with expressing themselves with writing. Students clearly articulated their penchant toward using the camera and editing as means for self-expression. Their preference

**Table 1. Case study group responses to differences between composing with video and print: interview question one**

| Student | How is writing a paper different from making a video?  |
|---------|--|
| Eddie   | Cause its easier to express your feelings and stuff through like a camera. And like acting it out and putting music... well at least for me then it is to like write it out. Cause it just seems like you can't write all your feelings and stuff on a paper sometimes. Sometimes its easier to express it by seeing it.   |
| Michael | Well, like in English class, I can't really write out what I want to think, but in the video, I can just say it and then we can just do it. Like show it on camera.  |
| Craig   | Its so much more expressive then what do you want to do cause in a video. Like there's one little piece of paper—you can't do everything you want. It doesn't make sense what you want to do.  |
| Tom     | Writing is a lot harder for me. So I wouldn't be able to show my ideas, how I really wanted to, than how I did it in the film. So as writing, I am not a good writer, it probably wouldn't have came out the same. And when I got to use the camera I got to show my ideas a little bit better than you would see, you would see what I was trying to say better in video than if I was writing. |

**Table 2. Case study group responses to differences between composing with video and print: interview question two**

| Student | Follow up: why?  |
|---------|--|
| Eddie   | Because sometimes its, like, hard. Like even when you are thinking of something, its hard to say what you feel and sometimes it gets like lost behind your writing. Or you don't express it right through your words. And sometimes its just easier if somebody just sees it.  |
| Michael | Because I like really, don't know how to word it. Or get it together in the right way. I know what I want to say, but I just can't get it out to the right area, or whatever. I think it's easier [with video]. Just, like, think of something then you can just see it and just put it on the film instead of thinking and trying to write it down and put it in direct words and put the words in between everything else. |
| Craig   | I don't know just, for me pictures and all that just show more... I really don't have the best writing ability and all that. I'm just like for five minutes you can just show what you want to write then a hell of a long page paper... Just seems so much easier just to film something what you want to say, instead of having to write it down and get it all like... [makes frustrating sound].                         |
| Tom     | I can't use proper, like English all the time. If I would just put it down on camera, you would see what I was trying to do, you know. Probably I'm just more interested in working with a video, with a camera, than writing and I lose interest when I'm writing than when working with a camera.  |

**Table 3.** Survey results of interest and ability with print and media (on a five-point Likert scale, 1 being highest score, 5 being lowest)

|                                     | Case study group | All students | Males | Low-achieving students |
|-------------------------------------|------------------|--------------|-------|------------------------|
| English grade                       | 2.76             | 2.16         | 2.4   | 2.57                   |
| I am a good writer                  | 3.76             | 2.72         | 2.84  | 2.93                   |
| I enjoy writing                     | 4                | 3.09         | 3.18  | 3.4                    |
| I enjoy reading                     | 3.76             | 2.83         | 2.84  | 3.19                   |
| I feel comfortable using technology | 2.25             | 1.84         | 1.48  | 1.77                   |
| I enjoy working with video          | 2                | 1.75         | 1.71  | 1.83                   |
| I enjoy watching films              | 1.5              | 1.38         | 1.5   | 1.47                   |

for video over writing is no surprise given their self-reported low affinity for print (see Table 3). However, their interview responses (see Tables 1 and 2) explain *why* they felt more comfortable with video.

***An Understanding of the Conventions and Genres Within Which One Is Working and an Understanding of the Effects of Breaking Those Conventions***

The students exhibited an awareness of working within the music video genre, particularly in rap music. Scholes (1985) stated that in reading a wide range of genres, readers would become critics, able to see patterns and forms within the field. As my students had been exposed to a number of popular media texts during classroom deconstruction activities, they were not only organically introduced to a number of production techniques, but students were able to critically read the cultural norms for what was acceptable, particularly within the music video genre.

One such example is how they explored the issue of a violent act. This issue permeates music videos, particularly in rap. In the following example, the students attempted to understand the musical text through fleshing out details of an idea.

Tom: Like show like really showing how they really hang out and have all the best times they had, you know. And then they had the one person die. And then show, like, really stress on how he misses him, and show him by himself, and going to the grave, and, you know going to the Church or something and talking to the crucifix or whatever.

Craig: He could be like kneeling down or in shadow

- Tom: How he like wants to get back his boy, you know. And then just have him like how they used to hang and like all that. And then the one guy died and . . .
- Craig: . . . and like just like talking to at the Church he could be like saying all this stuff.
- Tom: Yeah, and you could just have him like (raises arms up) with his hands and show how he misses him real bad.

In this case, they were trying to come up with ways that would show the main character's grief in dealing with the loss of his friends. Here, they deal with the *consequences* of the violent act, something not often dealt with in the rap video genre.

***An Extended Process That Usually Includes Planning, Drafting, Feedback, Reflection, and Revising***

The boys clearly composed this project as extended process. For this video lasting just over five minutes, this group spent the better part of a semester completing it. They had two weeks of classroom brainstorming and production planning, several extended videotaping sessions that took place outside of school, and dozens of sessions—both in class and on their own time—editing their composition.

By examining a segment of one of their retrospective protocols, it is evident that they demonstrate planning, drafting, feedback, reflection, and revising. The following transcript excerpt is from the boys watching the draft of the previous day's footage, a scene involving a group of friends playing a game of dice outside when one of them is killed in a drive-by shooting.

- Tom: All right, now what man?
- Craig: Play it.
- Michael: He was going entirely too fast. Look how fast [the car] was going! That ain't no drive-by!
- Craig: Eddie, look, your shirt's like [whooshing sound].
- Tom: Oh man, that lady messed [this particular shot] up.
- All: No!
- Craig: Stop [the video].  
[Craig stops video]
- Craig: :53 [on tape counter].
- Eddie: :53. [plays video again]. Right before that, M gets in the camera. All right, let's see. What's this shot? This is a grille shot. I think this is a good one.

- Tom: We got this [expletive] messed up. When were playing [dice] we are looking the other way from where you were going.
- Tom: Oh yeah. We got it alright, but we don't . . . we gotta do a shot when they're grillin' us.
- Michael: Oh, you mean when they were playing dice, like when they were grillin' us we were pointing the other way?
- Craig: Yeah.
- Michael: We were all . . . pointed back the other way.
- Eddie: When I was grillin', you should have been like . . . acting like . . . something. Don't just stand there or something. [laughs]
- Michael: Yeah, yeah. We'll just keep that pointing like . . . like "they coming back" and that's when he really gets shot.

Given the number of times I formally and informally documented students' initial viewings of their footage, their reactions to the videotape and subsequent discussions are typical. In explaining this section, I have italicized those specific composition processes that the boys demonstrated. What is evident in the latter transcript is that the students were viewing a videotape of them *drafting* their music video. In watching the footage, they not only recreated the stories about what happened during the taping, they were critically reading the different takes of their footage to evaluate (*reflection*) which was the most effective one. Throughout their initial viewing, they were discussing (*feedback*) which scene worked best for the video they were composing. In addition, they were *planning* their next videotaping draft in order to make the shot sequence work. What is missing from this transcript is an explicit mentioning of *revision*. While it is not stated here, after they finished viewing the footage, they immediately began to edit the drive-by scene and spent several days revising the clip until they were satisfied with how the sequence looked.

***Building on Prior Knowledge and Understanding as a Basis for the Construction of New Ideas and a New Text***

The boys used their understanding of music videos, rap music, and the musical and lyrical texts of this song to create their own video interpretation. On their initial brainstorming day, they carefully listened to the song in silence, each member writing down potential concepts. After the song was over, they shared ideas and visuals they generated. From that group list, they formulated the guiding thesis

for their video as well as guiding strategies for how they would go about their composition. As the students further developed their ideas for their video, they played their song numerous times through.

In the 21 minutes they spent working on their project from their initial brainstorming day, the students made six specific references to the lyrical text of the song throughout their discussion. They did so as a way of checking authorial source in order to back up or challenge their ideas and understanding. In the following excerpt, the students were trying to decide how they are going to set up the logistics of the video: should they use a larger or smaller group of people? (Note: specific textual references are in bold):

Tom: I was thinking like a whole bunch of us like a (inaudible) and they like died or whatever. They could be like chilling at the house. Or I was thinking we could just have like two people, and they could be the best friends, and showing like how they like hang out all the time, how they pick up girls cause they said in the song, you know. And then like we have like one person or we could have some person on the corner slangin . . .

All: (laugh)

Tom: . . . cause they said they used to slang together . . . [It's about] how he wants to get back his boy you know. And then . . . just just have him like how they used to hang and all that. And then the one guy died . . .

Eddie: How many people should we have?

Tom: I think . . . I was thinking we should have a whole bunch of people and then a couple people just fading out.

Eddie: Yeah, that would look the most interesting.

Tom: Cause you said a group of 5, so we'll have like 5 people, and then we'll show like, we could show how like a couple of them went to jail you know.

Eddie: Yeah.

Tom: So did you wanna have like a whole bunch of people or just like one person cause the song is talking about best friends.

Eddie: Yeah, I was thinking like (inaudible) but we could have background people.

Craig: Yeah, you could have background people, [but show] just two people who are really tight.

Tom: Yeah, two main people.

Checking their interpretations against the lyrical text was important, especially as they were building on their understanding of the existing

song as they composed a new version of the original text. Notice how they referred to the text as a means of adding onto prior knowledge and understanding. The lyrics served as an important guideline, but they were not limited to the text as the sole source of information as they brought in their own ideas and interpretations.

### ***New Learning That Takes Place Through the Process of Composing***

An example of new learning that took place through the process of their video shoot would be how the students read their own work, particularly for revision purposes. In the following transcription, the students were editing a sequence of their footage.

- Craig: You got to get some more . . . get detail shots though.  
Michael: We are.  
Craig: [We should] put the camera on top of the car, pretend driving it, shoot the front of it . . . before Eddie is hanging out the window.  
Eddie: We still have to do inside the car and stuff.  
Michael: We did . . . [but] we had to stop cause it was starting to get dark . . . so we were like “we don’t have enough light.”

While watching their footage, they realized the need to use the camera more expressively the next time they went out to videotape. Craig talked about potential shots they needed to get, suggesting different camera angles and how they might go about filming the scenes. As the group watched what they had already videotaped, they realized the sequence needed additional shots to add more specificity to the scene.

Students learned about videography through the recursive process of composition. I saw this time and again, where the editing (revising) of the footage led to discussions on the videotaping (drafting). As they worked closely with the footage, they would learn about what they could have done differently with the camera to make the footage better. Likewise, they learned that their videography could be manipulated (slow motion, black and white, etc.) through editing.

### ***Rewarding Both the Process of Composing and the Ultimate Texts as Sources of Meaning***

The boys in the group all indicated that they found satisfaction in both the process of creating their video, as well as the final product.

In terms of process growth, Craig appraised his development as the group's primary editor:

I like how I learned to edit with the Casablanca [editing system]. I think the first time I sat down, I just looked to figure out the keys and pretty much got it. But I felt more confident every time I came up here on my lunch period by myself. I just got more confidence about what I was doing.

Eddie's statement reveals the group's sentiment regarding the dual satisfaction with process and product:

I guess like when you are filming it, you don't think it's as good as it is once you watch the final project. Like after we started getting the hang of filming and setting up the camera and getting our, filming or ideas and wherever, like once we started coming back to the studio and watching it, that's when I was like "Yeah, this going to be pretty good."

I documented each of the boy's demonstrative video composition growth over the arc of this project. While they all learned to operate the camera and editor, Craig and Eddie felt more comfortable operating the non-linear editor. Tom and Michael preferred videography. As previously mentioned, the students were less motivated about their project than every other production group. Despite this, all the members put forth quite a bit of effort to complete this music video composition. Moreover, in interviews they all indicated pride not only during the process of composing the video, but indicated a high level of personal satisfaction with the finished product. During the various stages of completion of the video, they would regularly bring students who were not in our class into the studio to view their work.

## ***DISCUSSION***

This study examined how lower-achieving students demonstrated complex composition strategies while reading and composing video projects. In looking at the case study group presented in this research, I framed their video project using Smagorinsky's (2002) definition of composing as a guiding framework for presenting the data. That



definition views *composition* as broadly defined, applicable to writing a print essay as it is to creating the visuals for a music video.

These students clearly met each definitional criterion for composition, and this has two implications. The first deals with reconsidering the intelligence of those students who normally do not fare well in traditional classroom settings. These students, whose self-reported grades were lower than mean of all those in the study, are not often typically thought of as the smart students. In the opening of this article, I mentioned my hesitancy when I saw their names on the class roster. Yet they demonstrated a measure of intelligence in their work that I did not expect. Though these students were self-reporting struggling writers with print, they were successful in completing parallel composition skills using video. This is not surprising given that through their surveys, interviews, and classroom behaviors, the boys indicated a much higher involvement with media texts than they did with print. Clearly, these students exhibited competence with the video equipment, not only to know how to use it, but also to create a purposeful composition.

These were students who professed not being inclined toward reading, yet demonstrated the ability to engage in a peer-led text discussion. As they read the lyrical and musical text of their selected song, they had a complex conversation, including offering textual support from the lyrics in informing their own interpretations and ideas. In a typical discussion over a classroom text, how often do teachers ask—or even beg—students to provide textual evidence for their ideas? These students demonstrated this skill as they composed a new video text. And in the 15 years I have worked with students and teachers with both print and media, I have seen numerous students who have not achieved school-defined success engage in intelligent reading of and writing with video.

A second implication is how we define and value forms of composition in the English language arts classroom. Without a doubt, print is more highly valued than other non-print modalities. Yet these students who struggled with print were able to perform those same skills—broadly defined—through a non-print modality. Rather than viewing the various forms of literacy as hierarchical, this study suggests more of a complementary approach. Print allows for certain skills to be better evident, while video allows for other skills to be more accessible—particularly capitalizing on the visual nature of the representation of the text.

It would be worthwhile to explore how the visual processes of video might inform their print literacy skills. In particular, how might the struggling print writers make explicit connections from those

parallel video functions? While I had no systematic data of this happening, as their classroom teacher, I had a number of informal discussions with these students when I helped them with print compositions (particularly for their regular English class assignments). I can anecdotally report that their success in composing with video gave us a language to talk about their written assignments. For example, in discussing the use of conventions such as transitions, the students seemed to make a clear connection as to the function a transition served, because they had used them with frequency and purpose in their video. I was able to use their knowledge of how they used transitions in discussing how they are used in print compositions.

How might we reconceptualize language arts classrooms to allow for a broad definition of literacy that encourages a range of student expression? In an era of standardization that increasingly seeks to narrowly define and measure literacy skills, we may instead need to expand in order to reach students' varying learning styles. If we teach literacy concepts using both print and non-print competencies to inform the other, students might be able to take more control over their meaning-making processes.

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